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ABSTRACT

This is a response to the criticism of "Sesame Street" by Herbert A. Sprigle in the December, 1972, issue of "Childhood Education." It is maintained that Sprigle misconstrued and misrepresented the program's mandate and objectives and that the design and reporting of his study are so flawed that his conclusions are virtually meaningless. The following are discussed as flaws or biases of Sprigle's study: (1) "Sesame Street" was pitted against a comprehensive program of classroom instruction, a contest in which it is not designed to compete; (2) there is a strong suggestion that the "Sesame Street" and classroom groups were not fairly matched, which casts doubt on all performance comparisons; (3) viewing times suggest that many in Sprigle's training program almost certainly viewed "Sesame Street"; (4) both groups of children were trained by Sprigle's own teaching staff; (5) the study focused only on five- and six-year-olds, whereas "Sesame Street's" primary target audience is four-year-olds; (6) the children at the end of the two groups were tested at the end of the first grade, when both groups were above the level of the "Sesame Street" curriculum; and (7) two of the tests given depend on manipulative skills, which obviously could not be part of the "Sesame Street" curriculum. Other conclusions of the study and assumptions about "Sesame Street" curriculum. Other conclusions of the study and assumptions about "Sesame Street" are discussed, as misinterpretations and misrepresentations. [Filmed from best available copy.] (KM)

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THE DEER AND THE DUCK

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I write in response to criticism of "Sesame Street" by Herbert A. Sprigle in Childhood Education (December, 1972)

Sprigle misconstrues and misrepresents Sesame Street's mandate and objectives. Moreover, the design and reporting of his "experiment" are so flawed as to make results he draws from them virtually meaningless and therefore invalid. His study was designed and either flawed or biased against Sesame Street in the following ways:

First, he pitted "Sesame Street" against a comprehensive program of classroom instruction, a contest it was never designed to enter into.

Second, Sprigle asserts that the two groups, the Sesame Street viewing group and those who were trained in his program, were selected at random, thereby suggesting they contained similar children. However, he reports the average IQ's as measured by a Draw-a-Man test given six months after the experiment started, for male and female Sesame Street viewers, as 84 and 82 respectively, and for those trained in his program as 120 and 110 respectively. These striking differences strongly suggest that the Sesame Street and classroom groups were not fairly matched from the beginning, and this consideration in turn casts doubt on all subsequent performance comparisons between the two groups.

Third, in the locale of the experiment, Jacksonville, Florida, Sesame Street was shown during the period of the experiment at an early evening hour, on Saturdays, and during the summer. Accordingly, many children in Sprigle's training program almost certainly viewed Sesame Street.

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Fourth, the two groups of children were trained by Sprigle's own teaching staff, and from a strict experimental point of view would have had to have been blind to the purposes of the experiment or shown otherwise to have been unbiased in order for the results to be valid.

Fifth, the Sprigle study focuses only on five- and six-year-olds, whereas the primary target audience for which Sesame Street was designed is four-year-olds.

Sixth, the children in the two groups were tested and compared at the end of the first grade, a procedure flawed on numerous counts. For example, members of the groups presumably had equal access to Sesame Street during the summer prior to and throughout the first grade; in all likelihood, by the end of the first grade, the children in both groups were performing far above the level of the Sesame Street curriculum, so that no differences on valid tests of the Sesame Street curriculum possibly could be found.

Seventh, two out of seven tests given by Sprigle depend on manipulative skills, which obviously could not be part of the Sesame Street curriculum.

Sprigle's review of his own experiment must be considered against his background of misconceptions about the television program. For example, he indicates that one group of children received "a complete Sesame Street curriculum," while the other received training from his own teachers in a classroom program he designed.

The fact is that there is no such thing as a "complete" Sesame Street curriculum. Workshop President Joan Ganz Cooney has stated on several occasions: "We have never thought of Sesame Street or programs like it serving to replace

preschool experience for young children. Sesame Street was never intended as a substitute for the kind of educational experience between a teacher and a child."

Sprigle has set up an ill-conceived competition between two entities, to put the comprehensive program of preschool instruction in a contest between one another, when one of the two is not a comprehensive program of preschool instruction.

Moreover, within the battery of tests waiting for the children at the end of this peculiar form of competition, two out of seven of those given by Sprigle depend on manipulative skills (namely, the Copying subtest of the Metropolitan Readiness Test, and the Draw-a-Boy-or-Girl-Like Yourself test). It is crucial in order for Sprigle to support his case against Sesame Street that he first establish the fairness of the tests, and he goes to great lengths to do so. In his article, immediately after mentioning the tests, he misleadingly asserts: "These tests measure precisely those experiences to which the child was exposed on Sesame Street."

What Sprigle is saying, in effect, is something like this: "Look, Sesame Street, we're going to have a race between your television program and my kindergarten program. In this race I'm a duck and you are a deer. I make the rules and one of them is that the post-training competition will include a test of swimming and a test of diving."

I take issue with other misinterpretations and misrepresentations. For

to narrow the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

neighborhoods.

But for all these efforts the gap unquestionably remains. The position of the Workshop is that below a certain level of literacy, an individual's options are sharply limited, while above that level, his prospects for participation in the benefits our society affords are markedly increased. We do believe we can realistically hope with the use of broadcast television in the form of such programming as that represented in Sesame Street and The Electric Company to help ensure that a maximum of persons in our society make it beyond that basic level.

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In light of the immense cost and impact of a comprehensive national program of early childhood training programs, Sesame Street is a bargain supplement. We should all be exploiting the enthusiasm about early learning that is catalyzed by the series in order to build support for better classroom programs.

Most readers, and certainly most parents, appreciate that Sesame Street is hardly a conspiracy to demean children. Sprigle cites the fact that adults on the show talk more than children and that they often direct the activities of the children. He is correct. We have never been able to solve completely the problem of the "scripted" feeling of the show, although I could recite a number of successful ways in which we have managed to improve the show along these lines over the past four years. Our advisors

but do not feel as Sprigle does that viewing children are being harmed by

Sprigle has reported two extensive nationwide surveys to determine the

effects of Sesame Street on the specific learning skills of viewers. These

surveys were made by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and showed that

regular viewers registered substantial gains over non-viewers. Nowhere in

his article does Sprigle make reference to this evidence.

Finally, for Sprigle to base an attack on Sesame Street on research

that is unpublished is a breach of standard professional practice. Sprigle

has explicitly refused my written request, dating back to mid-1979, for

access to his research. In so doing, he has made it impossible for me

to review and evaluate his methods and procedures in adequate detail.

In any event, even without access to more detail, in conception and

research design his studies are so thoroughly flawed as to be meaningless.

His conclusions are his personal opinion, and no more.

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